

The Boer War - A Struggle for Mastery in South Africa

by Frank McDonough | *History Today*

Frank McDonough looks at recent thinking on the origins of the war of 1899-1902

The Anglo-Boer War which broke out in 1899 and ended in 1902 was a deeply significant event in the history of the British Empire. A British imperial army, which at one stage numbered 450,000 men and was drawn from all parts of the Empire, faced a Boer population of less than 100,000 who were mostly Protestant farmers. To defeat them the British resorted to extremely brutal tactics. Farms were burned down, crops destroyed, villages laid waste. The country was divided into war zones which were separated by barbed wire fences. The captured prisoners of war and women and children were put in concentration camps. The war led to the death of over 60,000 people and cost the British government £250 million. The origins of the Boer War have been the subject of fervent historical debate ever since.

Anglo-Boer antagonism

The immediate cause of the war revolved around what would appear to have been a rather minor argument between Britain and Transvaal about the civil rights of British immigrants employed in the flourishing gold and diamond mines in the region. The British government wanted the independent Boer republic to grant full citizenship rights to this 44,000 strong, immigrant community. The Boers called these immigrants Uitlanders, which literally meant outsiders. Paul Kruger, the Transvaal President, refused to give to British demands. He claimed the Uitlander issue was really a rather limp British excuse for gaining control of the Transvaal.

The Uitlander dispute was really part of a long standing mutual hostility between Britain and the Boer republics. At the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company established a small trading station near the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of South Africa. This became known as Cape Colony, a community of Protestant farmers, predominantly of Dutch/German descent. They called themselves trekboers (also known as Boers) and farmed land they had gained from African tribal peoples. This rather unique group of pilgrims described themselves as 'Afrikaners' (the people of Africa) and spoke a variant of Dutch they called 'Afrikaans'.

The British ended the Boers' dominance in 1806 by capturing Cape Colony and turning it into a crucial naval base for British trade on the route to Asia and the Far East. Yet the independent and obstinate Boers were never to accept British rule. They were extremely outraged when the British abolished the slave trade in 1807, because they saw slavery as vital to their own farming activities. The British decision to abolish slave owning in 1834 was the last straw. Many Boers were so incensed they crossed the Orange and Vaal rivers on a 'great trek'

northwards in Africa to set up two independent states (Transvaal and the Orange Free State). These 'Boer Republics', as they became known, enshrined their unique Protestant identity and language in their constitutions.

By 1855 the British had reluctantly accepted the independence of these two rather insular regimes as a fact of life. Yet Anglo-Boer relations remained tense. In 1877 Britain took over the Transvaal at the request of its government, which felt threatened by a tribal coalition led by the Zulus people. The British helped the Transvaal defeat the Zulus in a war which began in 1879. With the Zulus out of the way, the Boers wanted Britain immediately to restore their independence. When the British refused, the Transvaal attacked Cape Colony in 1881 (the First Boer War) and gained a famous victory at Majuba Hill during the brief conflict. By two agreements in 1882 and 1884 the British government decided to restore partial independence to the Transvaal but continued to supervise their foreign policy and retained the right to intervene, in certain circumstances, in domestic matters. In the run up to war, the Transvaal and the British government argued over exactly who had overall control of domestic policy.

Beneath the surface of Anglo-Boer hostility, however, lurked harsh economic reality. In the late nineteenth century diamonds and gold were suddenly discovered in large quantities in Cape Colony and the Transvaal. This 'mineral revolution' transformed the economy of the region and the nature of Anglo-Boer rivalry, which started to become more and more of a power struggle. The Transvaal had suddenly emerged as a rich and prosperous country with a growing economy. The bulk of wealth, however, was controlled by a group of British and German gold and diamond mineowners ('Rand millionaires') who had established mines in the area and attracted large scale British financial investment. The major mineowners supported the Uitlanders' claims for civil rights primarily because they believed that unless local workers were given civil and political rights, they would not remain in the country. Yet an influx of new skilled workers from Britain and Europe was becoming vital for continued economic expansion of the gold and diamond industry in the region.

The roles of four key individuals – Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister of Cape Colony, Sir Alfred (later Lord) Milner, British High Commissioner in South Africa, Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, and Paul Kruger the President of the Transvaal – are also extremely important in explaining Britain and the Boers went to war.

Cecil Rhodes

He arrived in South Africa in 1870, aged seventeen, full of ambition. He quickly made a fortune from diamond mining and desired the expansion of the British Empire in South Africa. By 1890 Cecil Rhodes was Prime Minister of Cape Colony. He used this power base swiftly to expand British rule in Southern Africa by capturing by armed force the area which later became known as Northern and Southern Rhodesia (modern Zambia and Zimbabwe) and by bringing Nyasaland (modern Malawi) under British protection.

Now in a dominant position, Rhodes decided to deal with the Boer Republics. He encouraged British settlers to go and work in his diamond mines in the Transvaal and agitate for voting rights. In 1895 decided to support an armed coup which was designed to seize control of the Transvaal. Unfortunately the planning of the raid was left to one Dr. Jameson, an old friend who fancied himself a military genius but was as effective as Captain Mainwaring in *Dad's Army*. Jameson thought a raiding party of a mere five hundred armed men would be enough to complete the task. A planned uprising of the Uitlanders never even took place. The Boers had no difficulty in rounding up Jameson's small force.

The Jameson Raid was a deep humiliation for Rhodes and the British government. World opinion felt Britain was bullying a small power. To assuage these fears Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, and Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, were forced to deny any knowledge of the raid (although it appears that Chamberlain was somewhat implicated). Cecil Rhodes was left to carry the can for the fiasco. He resigned as Prime Minister of Cape Colony. The whole incident had plunged Anglo-Boer relations to their lowest ebb. They were to get even lower when in 1897 Joseph Chamberlain appointed Sir Alfred Milner (later Lord Milner) as British High Commissioner for South Africa. Milner, a militant imperialist, was supposedly attempting to heal the wounds left behind by the Jameson Raid. Yet only days before his departure for South Africa he was telling a friend that he was going there to 'teach those bloody Boers a lesson'. The irresistible force of Milner now faced the immovable obstinacy of Kruger.

Sir Alfred Milner

Not surprisingly, the role he played in turning antagonism into war is extremely important when discussing the origins of the war. It was Milner who played the most crucial role on the British side. He was deeply hostile to the Boers, hated Kruger, put enormous pressure on the Transvaal government in the run up to the war, pressed the Uitlander issue incessantly, whipped up anti-Boer feeling in the press, helped deny the Transvaal capital, gained support from the 'Rand millionaires' and brought many leading figures in the Unionist government to support his crusade to tame the Boers. It seems Milner saw the dispute as a struggle for mastery in South Africa which he was convinced Britain had to win if she was to remain the world's major imperial power.

This helps to explain the strident tone he adapted in all his negotiations with the Transvaal in the run up to the war. The most crucial meeting to settle the Uitlander dispute took place in May 1899 at Blomfontein when Milner met Kruger to hammer out a solution. Milner wanted full citizenship to be granted to all Uitlanders within five years. In reply Kruger offered the Uitlanders full citizenship within seven years in return for a future British guarantee of the independence of the Transvaal. He also expressed a willingness to discuss 'all outstanding issues' at an international conference. Milner simply rejected both offers point blank. Kruger responded by saying bluntly; 'It is our country you want'. From this point peace had no chance.

It seems pretty clear that it was Milner's uncompromising stance which backed Kruger into a corner. Even so, few historians are now prepared to suggest Milner was deliberately planning to achieve British control of the Transvaal by force alone. It seems Milner believed Kruger would 'bluff up to the canon's mouth' and then cave in. The failure of the Cabinet, Milner, the Colonial Office and War Office to make adequate preparation for an armed struggle adds weight to this interpretation. As Cain and Hopkins in *British Imperialism* (1993) put it: 'Milner helped to stir the pot. He did not supply the ingredients. More important were the British government: and, indirectly, the mine owners'.

Paul Kruger

Recently the role of the Transvaal President has come under great scrutiny. It is easy to view Kruger as the victim of premeditated bullying at the hands of the 'mighty' British Empire. He certainly believed the British were cold-bloodedly planning to overthrow the Transvaal – especially after the Jameson Raid. His negotiations with Milner seemed to indicate the British were not bluffing. It is now becoming clear, from recent research, that Kruger was not the innocent victim of British bullying he was often portrayed as by his supporters – and most neutral contemporary observers of the crisis at the time. It seems Kruger never wanted to concede voting rights to the Uitlanders at all. Even before the Jameson Raid he had been buying arms from Germany in preparation for a war that most of his government and his leading army chiefs of staff saw as 'inevitable'.

The resolve of Kruger to fight was stiffened by the leading Boer Generals (especially Smuts) who constantly advised Kruger that even if war came the British could be defeated. Kruger knew he could rely completely on the Boer farmers to fight bravely to preserve their independence. A great many historians now subscribe to the view that the Transvaal was not the poor unfortunate victim of Milner's bullying. They had their own aims in South Africa. There were many Boer generals who believed a war with Britain might end up with the same result as the American War of Independence – a United States of Southern Africa under the leadership of the Transvaal. The fact that the Transvaal was more determined (and better prepared) to fight than Milner anticipated must now cast doubt on the previous idea that the war was largely engineered by Milner, Chamberlain and the British Government.

Joseph Chamberlain

The role of the British Colonial Secretary from 1895 to 1903 is also important. He soured Anglo-Boer relations in the run up to war in three ways. Firstly, he told Kruger the peace treaties Britain signed at the end of the First Boer War had not – as the Transvaal government believed – restored full control over domestic policy to the Republic. Secondly, it was Chamberlain who appointed Alfred Milner. Thirdly, he encouraged the City of London to deny the Transvaal loans for long-term investment. Yet whether Chamberlain did all this as part of a deliberate plan to instigate a war with the Boer Republics remains a matter of dispute among historians. It used to be assumed Chamberlain cynically planned

the war and that Milner was his willing tool. Historians now suggest it was the other way around. Chamberlain supported, often reluctantly, Milner's actions. It is true that Chamberlain wanted the Transvaal to accede to British requests to give the Uitlanders civil rights. Yet it seems he wanted the matter settled – short of going to war. No concrete sources have yet emerged to prove otherwise.

War and peace

By the autumn of 1899 Chamberlain, the Cabinet, the majority of MPs and press had all swung round to Milner's earlier view that the Boers needed 'teaching a lesson'. British troops were sent to South Africa to add the final pressure on Kruger. The Boers were now left with two choices, either accept British demands or fight for their independence. They chose the latter option.

On 9 October 1899 Kruger sent a telegram demanding Britain remove its troops from the Transvaal border or he would declare war. At the same time he offered to settle the matter at an international conference. The British government did not even reply. On 11 October 1899 the Transvaal (much to the surprise of Milner) launched the attack on Cape Colony which started the Boer War. On hearing this news Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister, said, 'this has relieved us of the task of explaining to the British public why we are at war'. The full weight of the mighty British Empire was now ranged against a mainly farming community. The general view in Britain was that 'it will be all over by Christmas'.

Yet it took nearly three years for the 'mighty' British Empire to humble a relatively small number of independent-minded farmers. A total of 450,000 troops recruited from all over the Empire were required finally to defeat the plucky Boers who had put up a most spirited fight. In May 1902 the Boer leaders finally surrendered at Vereeniging. The British lost 22,000 soldiers, 25,000 Boers died and approximately 12,000 Africans were killed. The war had been costly in money as well as lives. As Lloyd George said, 'every shell fired amounted to the cost of a pension for an old person in Britain'.

The historical debate

The Boer War has produced a great deal of controversy among historians. The major area of debate on the causes of the war used to centre on the roles of Rhodes, Milner, Chamberlain and Kruger. Yet as we have seen all their roles have now been re-evaluated. What has also happened within the current debate is a shift away from a discussion of the roles of the leading personalities towards a discussion of underlying economic factors, especially the role of gold-mining interests and power politics which guided their actions.

It used to be traditional to blame the war on the leading British officials who, it was once claimed, supported the interests of British mineowners and investors. J.A. Hobson started this trend in his deeply influential books *The South African War* (1901) and *Imperialism: A Study* (1902). He argued that the war was caused

by a shady conspiracy of financiers, mine owners and 'corrupt politicians'. He believed Milner and Chamberlain cynically used the Uitlander issue as a cloak to hide a desire for private profit. Yet this sort of conspiracy theory has become extremely discredited in recent times. Even so Thomas Pakenham in *The Boer War* (1979) did strongly argue that the leading mineowners 'were active partners' with Lord Milner in the making of the war. In more recent studies, however, this view has been attacked. Andrew Porter's *The Origins of the South African War* (1983) now represents the current orthodoxy. He rejects the view that the British government were the 'puppets on a string' of Milner and the mineowners. He claims the British government was tightening the screws on the Transvaal from 1895 onwards, because they feared the implications of a vibrant country with an obstinate and independently minded government which the British felt unable to trust. This view has been recently supported by Cain and Hopkins in *British Imperialism* (1993). They claim the British government and the Colonial Office were leading the drive to place pressure on the Transvaal in support of broader strategic, political and economic aims which included, but were not dominated by, the desires of the mineowners.

It now appears correct to integrate the role of long term economic factors with the short term political decisions of the leading decision-makers, in order fully to understand why the Boer War occurred. The startling growth of the Transvaal not only turned the country from a backward agricultural community into a growing economy but also produced a potential threat to British interests throughout South Africa. As the Transvaal prospered, the British became impatient with its independently minded government. In other words, the British could not trust the Kruger government to support British interests. As this idea grew stronger, and as Kruger continued to resist British demands, the two powers were on a collision course in which one side had to climb down. The British assumed the Transvaal would prefer to settle the matter peacefully rather than be defeated in war. Yet the Boers were so determined to preserve their independence that they were not prepared to go down without a fight. No doubt the British government would have preferred to have gradually dominated the country by extending democracy to the British immigrant community rather than by outright aggression. In the end, Kruger's decision to put his head in 'the canon's mouth' probably saved the British government from further bouts of the very public bullying of a small power. Against all the odds, it was the Boers who finally called the British bluff.

Frank McDonough is Senior Lecturer in Modern Political History at Liverpool John Moore University and is the author of *The British Empire 1815-1914* (Hodder and Stoughton 1994).

Further reading:

- I. Smith, *The Origins of the South African War*, 1993
- T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 1979 P. Warwick (ed.), *The South African War*, 1980
- A.N. Porter, 'The South African War 1899-1902: Context and Motive Reconsidered', *Journal of African History*, 1990
- I. Smith, *The Origins of the South African War 1899-1902: a Reappraisal*, 1990

- A. N. Porter, 'Britain, the Cape Colony and Natal 1870-1914: Capital, Shipping and the Imperial Connection', *Economic History Review*, 1980
- D. Judd, *Radical Joe*, 1977
- P. Cain & A. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (pp. 369-81), 1993
- S. Chapman, 'Rhodes and the City of London: another view of Imperialism', *Historical Journal*, 1985
- D. Cammack, 'The Politics of Discontent: the Grievances of the Uitlander Refugees 1899-1902', *Journal of South African Studies*, 1982